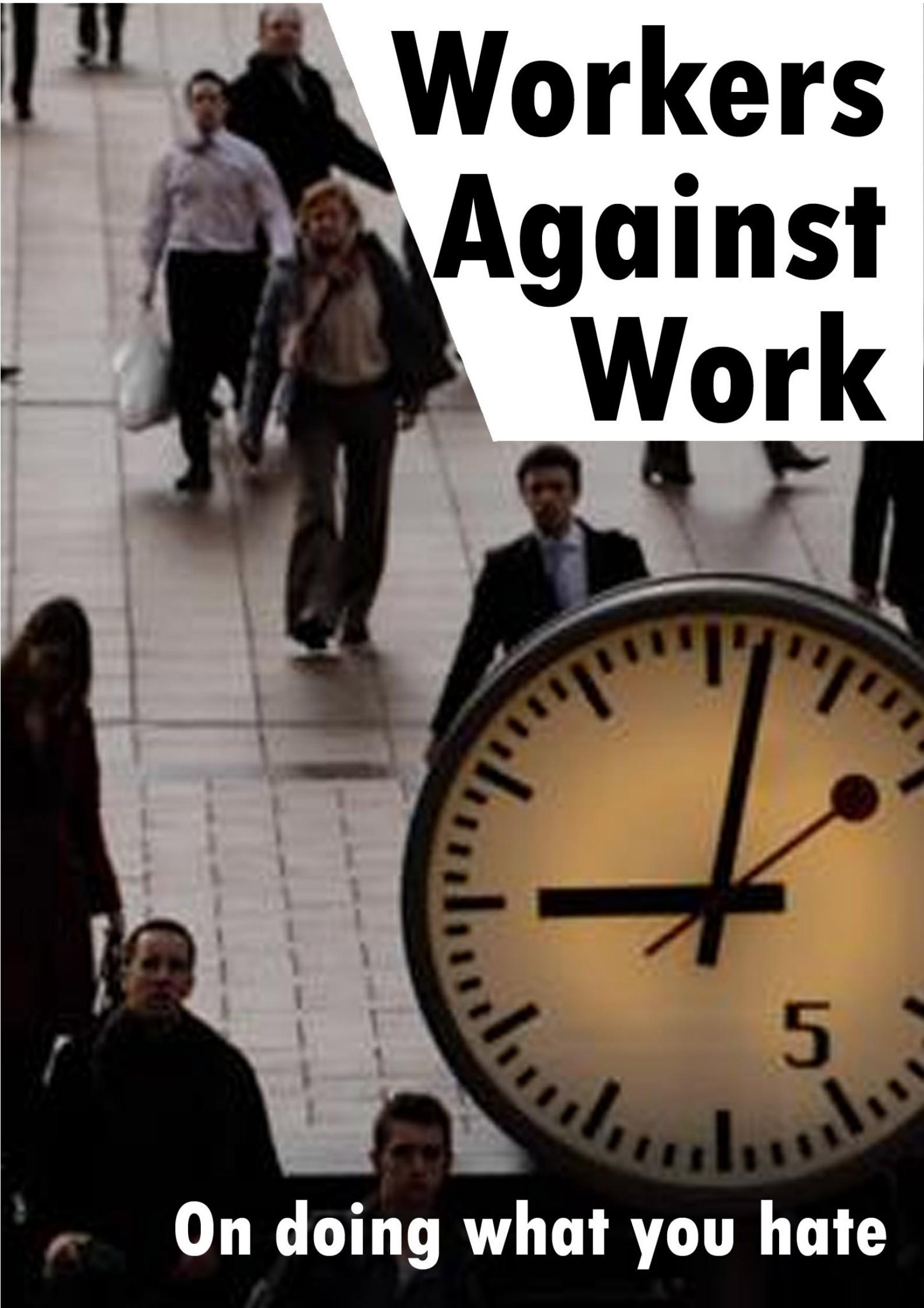


Workers Against Work



On doing what you hate

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If to grow up and get a life means to enter into the professional working world and, in many instances, climb the career ladder, then what's in it for those who don't intend on growing up on those conditions alone, for those who maintain little or no coherent relationship with present modes of existing, who reject the future and all its currently miserable projections? To be anti-work isn't necessarily to be for laziness (although it has an investment stake in that utopia); it is rather to flatly reject the idiotic premise of progress, futurity, individual freedom, fulfillment and success, as it is currently projected through the insular prism of competitive, atomised and alienated wage labour, and to be opposed to the historical norms and prescribed patterns of adulthood that are reinforced and reproduced by a positive work ethic and the world of work in general.

Work has never just meant subsidising your existence. Labour has always existed in relation to a base-line narrative that not only tells us that work is somehow inherently "good for us", but that serves to delimit our subjectivity and determines to a large extent how we live out and regulate our lives. The invention of the work ethic served to tie worker's fears, desires and passions into their acting relationship with labour. In early capitalist accumulation the protestant work ethic told workers they were working for their personal redemption. You worked for God and thus for your salvation. As capitalism matured throughout the 20th century, then the moral and ethical dimensions of work acquired a more solidly material basis. You worked, ostensibly, to ensure something like broad-based prosperity, and for your own sense economic security, as well as your happiness, your safety and your freedom. The necessary pre-conditions for achieving these apparent luxuries included mastery of one's self, one's identity (a process of internalised self-government, self-regulation and finally, self-immunisation) and one's property (which of course included wife and children.)

In her book *State of Insecurity* Isobell Lorey describes how this practice of normalising self-government in modern capitalist economies 'is based on an imagination of coherence, identity and wholeness that goes back to the construction of a male, white, bourgeois subject.' She goes on: 'constructions of authenticity of this kind, continue up to the present to nourish notions of being able to live one's life freely, autonomously and according to one's own decisions, in other words being sovereign.' This imagination of personal coherence - which is reinforced by various institutions and cultural norms - is what effectively distinguishes between appropriate and inappropriate lifestyle choices, between

useful subjects/producers and threatening others. And it's these external pressures, orbiting our popular ideas about work, which function to bend us into particular "coherent" life-shapes, towards a fidelity to a future we have no stake in. It's an existence you didn't necessarily choose, *it just happened.*

In the current socio-economic order, in the era of normalised precarity (described by Lorey as 'living with the unforeseeable, with contingency', and with little or no prospect of long-term economic stability), with imagined metaphysical debt-clouds gathering ominously overhead in most of Europe and America, our ideas about work might have reached their existential apogee. The trauma of mass alienation has meant that we don't just want material possessions any more; we want reconciling, to feel like our lives' have meaning and purpose. It's here that the current conception of the work ethic begins to promise us something more transcendental in return for our labour, something apparently worth more than money, with renewed appeals to the ethics of individual responsibility and self-optimisation, a command to compulsive self-marketing and round-the-clock identity management.

You can see it in our rhetoric, it's everywhere, in the rise of life-hacking methodologies and the politics of well-being; whether you're *managing your work life, managing your time correctly, choosing the right career path, realising your potential, succeeding in the workplace, or finding your true calling*. There's heaps of ghastly literature on this kind of stuff. You've seen them before; they have pebbles and sun kissed clouds and butterflies on the cover. A quick search on Amazon brings up hundreds of results: 'The seed: finding purpose and happiness in life and work', 'Real happiness at work: meditations for achievement, accomplishment and peace', 'Making it all work: winning at the game of work and the business of life', 'Happiness at work: be resilient, motivated and successful - No matter what,' (*no matter what*). There's even apps for this sort of thing: **bloom** ('*Bloom keeps you grounded. Sure, it can remind you to take a drink of water or tell a loved one how you feel, but bloom is more of a "centering" app in that you can use it as an escape from the "to do list" and get in touch with your "to be" list*'), **Nirvana** ("*Nirvana frees your mind to focus on actually getting things done. If you've had enough of generic to-do lists, it's time for Nirvana*"), **Streaks** ('*this app follows the model of the popular "don't break the chain method" in that you use the app to track how you are doing in the pursuit of your goal. Great for goal setting.*')

Given that most available work is essentially surplus labour, only in place to keep the market occupied with itself, it's no surprise that in most western economies the moral and ethical dimensions of work re-emerge reinforced within this strangely "enlightened" discourse on personal growth and self-realization. As the nature of what we actually produce and for what exact value becomes - for a

huge cross-section of the workforce - increasingly nebulous and indeterminate, the work ethic is being systematically reorganized into an act of unconditional self-love, focused solely towards the positive realization of your true potential. It's a recruitment logic that knows no boundaries. It doesn't just want you to turn up on time; it wants all of you all of the time. Of course, it's in the name of true love that we're also willing to blindly sacrifice ourselves. Love warrants our subsumption; it's also exhausting, and rigidly controlling.

In a critique of the rise of the elegant 'Do What You Love' asceticism for *Jacobin* magazine (lovable work as defined as creative, intellectual, prestigious), Miya Tokumitsu identifies that the real achievement of this stylish new work mantra is in its being able to persuade workers that their 'labour serves the self and not the marketplace.' *Work can be play*; it might not mean your salvation or you (and your family's) security, but it's what makes you a coherent whole, fulfilled and sufficient, a happy worker - even if it kills you. It's working against these abstract ideals that it becomes far easier for employers to circumvent genuine concerns surrounding the actual conditions of the work you do, while simultaneously increasing productivity rates and dismantling any realistic promise of worker solidarity in the process: we work too much for too little or - if you take an unpaid internship - for no money at all; your time is fiendishly exploited, working towards impossible targets, and are encouraged to compete with colleagues you want to kill; your pay is slashed arbitrarily, and your private life and performance is routinely scrutinised; this is a stepping stone, that's good experience, and so on and so on.

But Tokumitsu's essay is for the most part concerned with the elitist nature of the 'DWYL' ethic, in how it often privileges and elevates loveable work and negates unlovable work. Which is true, to an extent, but it's worth remembering that in a lot of unlovable work you're forced to smile (it's company policy), and that most of those in ostensibly loveable lines of work aren't actually smiling at all. Far more ubiquitous than the 'Do What You Love' mantra is another sly psychological rudder of management: 'Love What You Do'. It's an ethos that's fed pretty far down the job ladder, one bound up in our ideas about debt, moral responsibility and personal performance. The invocation to 'Love What You Do' appeals to notions of "hard work", wholesale commitment, flexibility, contribution and participation as indicators of individual fulfillment, purpose and wholeness. You're constantly expected to exceed the job description. Of course, most of us hate what we "do", and maybe it's that what you actually *do* (artist, writer, political activist, religious street preacher, internet hacker, etc. etc.) is something that's (barely) sustained and subsidised by your job.

The point isn't just that most work is underpaid, exhausting and time-consuming, if not entirely pointless, but that as workers we're encouraged to

sustain a kind of choreographed, self-reflexive and meaningful relationship with the jobs we perform, our professional lives, and our attitude to work in general. This new permutation of the work ethic is thus internalised, as a kind of personal administration project, subordinate to all the pressures of becoming an apparently legitimate and functioning adult. It's a situation where work relations and self-relations have merged powerfully behind vaguely aspirational norms. It's not just that now most people take work home with them, or on the commute, but that work now takes on innumerable user-friendly forms, which have slipped unnoticed into all aspects of daily life: the gym's work, Tinder's work, Instagram's work, healthy-living's work, "growing up" and "getting a life": *it's work*. The entire process of production has become a part of the social, a tedious, unending performance. And it's only exasperated by the increased pressure to cater to multiple personas and identities, both online and offline, serviceable to a variety of audiences and markets, utilisable to a range of employers.

Here, Lorey identifies a paradigmatic blurring of the classical liberal distinctions between the private and the public self: the 'worker becomes a self-entrepreneurial virtuoso because she or he must perform their exploitable self in multiple social relations before the eyes of others...the realisation of this self, reduced to labour, requires performance in public.' It's a kind of dull, monotonous flattening that's also wildly disorientating, and potentially traumatic. So then the imagined coherence sold to us today is that of being flexible, able to morph smoothly and make cool transitions, but remaining solid in the middle, happy and of course, employable. It's madness. You're perpetually on call, speeding wildly through various fields of expectation and initiation, dragging yourself through life lost in a scattered mess of co-ordinates that were plotted by somebody else. In reality, you don't know who the fuck you are.

Society is working in overdrive and in extreme cases it's leading to spasms and explosive ruptures where the pressures and strains of living have become too much to handle (theorist Franco Berardi is convinced of a clear correlation between the nature of contemporary capitalism and the current state of mental health.) The number of suicides and random acts of mass killings (not infrequently perpetrated by white middle class males, in decent professions) are rising rapidly in the west. And in Japan, it has been well documented that thousands of young men and women (called hikokomori) are rejecting work altogether, eschewing all the manifold expectations of traditional adulthood, staying in their bedrooms all day long and cutting off all social ties, choosing instead to live through the presence of online avatars, in chat rooms, gaming platforms, message boards etc. It's a weirdly double-sided phenomenon (one by no means exclusive to Japanese society.) The hikokomori might indeed have part

of the solution, going some way to undermine or at least disrupt classical liberal ideas about individual freedoms, and the nature of their hibernation is in a way a cruel form of protest. But it's hardly the perfect solution: they're victims, too, isolated and inert, still passively consuming, still thoroughly enmeshed in the whole ritualised performance of semio-capitalism.

Today, opting out of the working world altogether might no longer suffice as a form of subversive or radical protest, certainly not in any collective sense. For one, the reality of living has become so expensive that the idea of rejecting work without shutting off from the world around you is a possibility available only for those who can literally afford it, those with valuable safety networks and financial parachutes. And total withdrawal from the system is only a kind of slow capitulation. For now, it's about trying to exist and thrive - through various parasitical strategies - in the trembling interstices of contemporary capitalism. When the world of work constantly promises to *fill us in*, make us feel *whole*, the logic of the anti-worker pre-empts this veiled threat by first assessing how much of a defence can be mustered against this obtrusive *filling in*. Faced with the manipulative and exploitative appeals to *do what we love* or *love what we do*, there is it seems just as much logic in doing what you hate. All that's left is to repudiate the current structure and value of work altogether, to be workers against work entirely. Our value lies elsewhere.

It might not be possible or even desirable to currently survive outside the world of wage labour, but there's certainly space for thinking and existing outside the oppressive sphere of normalising self-regulation imposed on us by the world of work, and all its tedious long-term manifestations. Forget belonging. Forget the future. Resistance means putting our collective anxieties into use, finding solidarity and empathy in our shared weak points, in our despair. Because there's a potential for social solidarity in the cracks opened up by precarious wage labour, in our states of perpetual flux, in those points that give and buckle in our shared experience: we are precarious workers, on short-term contracts, in short-term accommodation, for now perhaps "doing" what we hate, uncommitted and faithful to our incoherence; we do not expect anything from your miserable idea of a future, we refuse to bear the burden of your stupid metaphysical debt crisis: *we do not figure into your long-term plans*.

Lorey writes that 'through permanent singular refusals, the small sabotages and resistances of precarious everyday life, a potentiality emerges.' With wage labour and the current conception of the work ethic so deeply bound up in worlds of perception and abstraction, dealing in viscous moral imperatives, fraud, manipulation and blackmail, the first aim of the anti-work movement has to be to return the insult, from the inside out.

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